

Realer than Real: Retail Hyperreality and the Encoding of "Authentic" Cultural Symbolism

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Many retail settings, from the Rainforest Café to Disney's EPCOT Center, are engineered to allow consumers to vicariously experience some other place, time or reality. In this context, Baudrillard's notions of simulacra and hyperreality meet the everyday reality of marketing and retailing activities. These establishments cleverly blend traditional hospitality services, merchandising opportunities and carefully calculated design to offer "one-stop shopping" for those wishing to experience a foreign culture. For many consumers, these artificial *qua* real environments may literally constitute their sole contact with that culture. Indeed, the ability of clever marketers to create sanitized reproductions of "authentic" cultural experiences may result in the ironic outcome that consumers prefer the simulation to the actual experience.

The first paper: *But is it True Blue Mate? Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Authenticity* by Ronald Groves, Michael Solomon and Natalie Quilty focuses on encoding strategies utilized by The Outback Steakhouse chain to evoke Australian culture. Australian students reacted to photographs taken at an Outback restaurant in Alabama. They then created their own collages of an "authentic" Australian steakhouse. These were shown to both Australian and American students who were asked to comment on the authenticity of these Australian images. The findings of these cross-cultural interpretations on authenticity suggest that during the consumption of a host culture (in this case, literally including its food and drink), outgroup members ironically prefer the idealized prototypes to "the real thing."

The second paper by Patrick Hetzel was entitled *Authenticity in Public Settings: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Two Parisian Department Stores*. He uses a socio-semiotic approach on two very different Parisian department stores in order to show that "Le Bon Marche" created in 1852 on one hand and "Les Galeries Lafayette" on the other hand convey a sense of "authenticity" which is very different. This paper emphasizes that the aesthetic reference to "authenticity" is a multi-dimensional concept.

The final paper, *Le Parc Disney: Creating an "Authentic" American Experience* by Gary Bamossy and Janeen Arnold Costa focuses on efforts by the French theme park to offer an "authentic" American experience. Based upon stereotypical images of America in the 1950s - 1960s, the created hyperreality ignores social issues relevant to that place and time. Moreover, Europeans consume the American images uncritically, as intended. Here, America is the "exotic other" in the context of a sanitized hyperreality that provides entertainment, "fun" and a liminal experience.

The specific encoding strategies used to physically represent a culture are important both in terms of their marketing and consumer socialization value. How do managers and designers decide what design elements—such as the generous use of icons and artwork stereotypically associated with the culture—will capture the vicarious cultural experience? How do consumers use this information to form inferences about other countries and peoples? As we witness the increased "Disneyfication" of popular culture, to what extent does vicarious consumption of culture provided by commercial entities supplant "the real thing?"

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